

*'What doesn't the problem know
about your son or daughter?'*
*Providing the conditions
for the restoration of
a family's dignity*

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This paper looks at the effects of Problems in the lives of children and young people, and also why Problems, by definition, have a 'limited scope of interest', and therefore can never reflect the richness of young people's lives. The authors offer a range of ways that Problems can be directly responded to, including informing them of children's and young people's 'wonderfulnesses'. Several examples of therapeutic documents intended to provide a full disclosure of such 'wonderfulnesses' are provided.

Keywords: Problem's story, identity conclusions, 'wonderfulnesses', genealogy, problem-saturated, problem-situated, single story, therapeutic documents

INTRODUCTION

Problems, once they gain a position of supremacy, or even hegemony, often lead family members to take a single-storied view of their plight. Such hegemonic problems can penetrate their consciousness to the extent that they regard themselves disdainfully (Lindemann Nelson, 2001). This paper offers a method of redress whereby 'Problems' (with a capital P to show their 'personification' or 'thingification') are, in a manner of speaking, addressed directly, and informed of broader and multi-storied readings of young people, their families, and communities. These commodious readings are plotted by means of enquiry about the young person's 'wonderfulnesses' and how these might be genealogically linked to their family, forbearers, community, and culture.

This genre of practice is based on the idea that a dominant story (from here referred to as the Problem's Story) can persuade family members to see themselves and each other negatively as mothers, fathers, step-parents, caregivers, sons, and daughters. Being cast in such a light can, over time, condemn one to an identity as a 'bad' or inadequate mother, father, son, or daughter. At times, everyone can appear as if they were haunted by the Problem (Freeman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997). This can create the conditions for the provocative effects of such self and relational practices as blame, guilt, and shame, pitting family members against themselves and each other, and excluding from consideration any other account of their plight.

Amidst the many unproductive variations are 'You are to blame', 'You provoked me', and 'You should be ashamed of yourself', and conversely, equally fruitless allegations such as, 'I am to blame', 'I caused it', and 'I am the guilty party'. In such instances, incrimination of the young person, self-recrimination by the parents or mutual recriminations – whereby the young person and parents exchange accusations – seem the only options available. The query 'why did this happen?' sooner or later turns into 'who did it' or 'who is to blame' for the Problem? Persistent denunciation of this kind can lead to negative identity conclusions and deny family members their dignity and the family as a collective its sense of pride.

In what follows, we propose several remedies to the effects of the Problem's story on the identities of young people, their families, and communities. Instead of succumbing to such a denigration of their identities, they address the Problem through a range of formal means to apprise It of whom else their sons or daughters, and families might and could be. Claims are made and traced genealogically to substantiate histories, knowledges, values, aspirations, and skills to dignify those concerned so that they can seek to be known accordingly (White & Epston, 1990; White & Morgan, 2006). Such claims stake out the grounds from which young people and their families can contend with the Problem.

OUR CONTENTION ABOUT THE PROBLEM

We contend that the Problem only knows people according to their plight and consequent humiliation. As such, we expect the Problem holds them in low regard. The purpose of these enquiries is for families to make themselves known to the Problem, in light of their children's 'wonderfulnesses' (such as talents, abilities, capacities, values, interests, yearnings, callings, 'weird ablenesses', and so on) (Epston & White, 1992, pp. 173-188). These enquiries extend beyond the Problem's purview and also reach back to times before the Problem had intervened in the lives of families. The 'wonderfulnesses' of their children are genealogically connected to either previously unstoried pasts, the wonderfulnesses of their parents, or the legacies of the families and communities from which they come. Here are some brief examples:

- 'Katie, do you think you got any of your determination from your Mom?'
- 'Katie, knowing that your mother emigrated from Croatia and despite having to learn English, still passed her University exams with an A, did that inspire you in any way to deal so well with your learning problems at school?'
- 'Katie, do you think the fact that your Granddad, when he took up painting in watercolours on his retirement and would take you on his painting trips into the countryside, is something of a legacy that shows up in your desire to go to art school?'

- To Katie's mother: 'Do you suspect that Katie being known to her friends as "the one they can always call upon when the going gets tough" has anything to do with, as she described to us, you always "being there for me no matter what" when she was growing up?'

THE PURVIEW OF THE PROBLEM

It is taken for granted that parents know their children far better than any Problem ever could. This is especially true given the Problem's limited scope of interest in and narrow conceptualisation of young people as weak, vulnerable, ill-fated, misguided, innocent, imprudent, hapless, and so on. And it is almost always the case that parents have known their children longer than any Problem could have. It is known, too, that Problems, in general, have very circumscribed means of 'seeing' young people. Problems 'set up shop' on grounds with demarcated boundaries allowing in only certain 'facts'. This arranges for *problem-situated* vistas where the narrowest perspectives are visible and a single story is the only possible narrative outcome (Adichie, 2009). At best, the Problem's view is either biased or jaundiced rendering it oblivious to the histories and genealogies of the families and communities of afflicted young people. At worst, the Problem might be thought of as perverse in pursuing its own aims, authorising only single-story accounts of young people. It is not in the Problem's interests to sponsor other 'histories' of the young people who are inconvenienced or made to suffer at its whim.

We can ask families questions to validate any of our abovementioned assumptions:

- To parents: 'If the Problem were in possession of such knowledge [of the young person's wonderfulnesses], might it think twice about messing with your son/daughter, your family, and community?'
- To the young person: 'Do you think the Problem has any idea that you have this "wonderfulness" or can do this so "wonderfully" – or that you are a "good kid" or you want to be a "good kid"?''
- To the parents: 'Do you think the Problem has any idea about Julie's "wonderfulnesses", or

how Julie can do this so "wonderfully", or that Julie is such a "good kid", or wants to be a "good kid"?''

THE ETHIC OF FULL DISCLOSURE

Given the single-mindedness of Problems, it is unlikely that they would simply go away if ignored, or fade away with time. Problems are adept at keeping pace and growing right alongside young people. In discussions with many young people, when interviewed about how Problems go about approaching their assignments, they have explained: 'It doesn't get tired of messing with me!', 'It doesn't have any other hobbies!', 'It loves its work too much to ever consider an early retirement'. What we are proposing here is a kind of enquiry that would fully disclose to the Problem what it might now encounter when interfering with such a young person, his/her family, and community. Through such enquiry, instead of being pitted against one another, the young person and his/her family would join forces in accessing a multi-storied view of the family's plight in contrast to the single-storied view sponsored by the Problem.

We consider informing the Problem of all the young person's wonderfulnesses, ethically required to satisfy the terms of full disclosure. Because contemporary Problems share a neo-liberal view that individualises all experience, it is necessary to further inform the Problem that this young person is not standing alone and that his/her wonderfulnesses are not entirely private. Bauman (2001, p. 9) poignantly states:

What is at stake then is the acquittal ... of the awesome responsibility placed on one's shoulders – and on one's private shoulders alone – by irresistible 'individualization'. In our 'society of individuals' all the messes into which one can get are assumed to be self-made and all the hot water into which one can fall is proclaimed to have been boiled by the hapless failures who have fallen into it. For the good and the bad that fill one's life a person has only himself or herself to thank or to blame.

In fact we consider the young person's wonderfulnesses to be part of legacies (such as family, community, and culture) that have been

passed down or bequeathed to, and taken up by, the young person. (We will detail family and community legacies in a separate publication.) Such a full disclosure might be written up in concert with the young person and his/her family and sent by post or email or in some other dramatic fashion. On occasions, we have invited the Problem to make an appearance at a meeting in our offices or at a family's home so that full disclosure could be made. So far none has had the nerve to show up. But no matter, we remain ever hopeful, not unlike Vladimir and Estragon (from *Waiting for Godot*) that one day we will meet face to face. Despite its absence, the young person addresses the document to the Problem.

SAMPLE LETTER TO THE PROBLEM

Dear Problem:

We, the Jones Family, felt it was only fair for you to be informed of whom you are messing with as you might have got the idea that Julie was a pushover. We know you more or less caught Julie by surprise as she thought at first you were a 'friend and teacher'. She has informed us that you told her that you would look after her and make her life a lot better than how she was experiencing it at the time. But you may have thought you could just hoodwink her. It looks to us like you took advantage of her desire to learn things as she thought you would be a good teacher. You may have got the idea that she couldn't figure things out when your promises of her getting a better life turned out to be what she now considers 'out and out lies'. Still, when she was your student and you posed as her teacher, you may very well have got the impression that you'd just keep on pulling the wool over her eyes.

No wonder you will probably be surprised to learn from us that she is a 'very smart cookie'. We thought you better be warned just what a 'smart cookie' she is so we decided to tell you a lot of smart cookie stories about her. Why would we warn you

and not just let you find out the hard way? Well, our family is very fair and no matter what, we play clean and, not surprisingly, we don't like players who play dirty. But even if you play dirty, we will play fair because that is the right thing to do in our family.

Julie reported that, 'I like puzzles and hard problems. My favourite book is Harriet the Spy. I like that she's brave and does stuff and goes everywhere and solves things'. Jenny, Julie's Mom, confirmed this, and added, 'Julie is that child who always asked "Why?". From the time she learned to talk she had a million questions about why it rains or why you get the colour green from mixing blue and yellow together. And it wasn't just questions. She'd come up with some pretty colourful answers. You could see her mind working. 'Kevin, Julie's Dad, is convinced she has a sixth sense, especially when it comes to the family dog: 'It's uncanny. We all agree it's as if she can read Bucko's mind. He'll be rutting around, disturbed about something or other. Julie's usually the one to figure it out. She'll find a lost bone or toy; she'll play with him or just sit with him until he's calm'.

Now that you know who you are messing with, you might decide to leave her alone and go and bother some other kid. If you intend to stick around our family and bother her, at least you have been fairly warned you are in for more than you may have bargained for with Julie and us. Why? Because we have decided to 'team up'! Although we would not be happy at all for you to bother another young girl like Julie, we want you to know that if we find out that you have, we will go and tell them how we managed to send you packing.

Yours sincerely,

Julie, Julie's Mom Jenny, Julie's Dad Kevin, Julie's Brother Billy, and Bucko.

A DEMAND FOR AN APOLOGY

A demand for an apology from the Problem can be made by the young person, or on their behalf, by the parents. It is highly unlikely, if our experience is anything to go by, that a Problem will oblige, in spite of the just nature of the request. This was the case for David, aged 12, who realised this and wrote an apology from Anorexia to himself (Epston, 2008, pp. 180–181).

APOLOGY FROM ANOREXIA TO MYSELF

I am writing this apology to myself because I know that even though I may dream about it, even though I thoroughly deserve it, even though you have stolen every pleasure that I had in my life, I know that you are so heartless, so shallow, and so ruthless that you would never have the compassion or decency to ever make the apology that you have for so long owed me.

Here it is:

I am sorry that I have stolen your life away from you. I am sorry for turning every pleasure you once had in your joyful life into an unbearable torture, from your pleasure in eating to your pleasure in good company and sport. I made you hate yourself and see fault in everything that you were and did. I took away all your happiness and turned everything you found into a horrible ordeal. I sapped all your strength, turning you into a lifeless body. I deprived you of all the tastes you enjoyed and stole from you x kilograms, turning you into an unhappy skeleton. I lied to you, telling you that I would make you happy and an overall better person. When you did what I said, I was ruthless and pushed your face into the mud, making you hate yourself and blame yourself for things that I had forced on you and tortured you into doing.

It is obvious that it would be impossible to fix what I have done. There is no way that I

can take back having held you at death's door for so long. All I can do is apologise and leave you and your family alone forever.

Yours truly sorry,

Anorexia. (March 26, 2006)

A PROBLEM REPLIES

A problem could conceivably reply to a young person although this would have to be cooked up between the therapist and parents in a private meeting or online. When circumstances necessitate, it may have to be written in the first instance by the therapist and edited and refereed by the family.

Dear Julie:

I had no idea you were such a 'smart cookie' but those stories your Mum, Dad and brother told me certainly were convincing. I just thought I could pull the wool over your eyes and you would follow my advice blindly to steal stuff from your parents' wallets. I had no idea you were a person with such strong values, especially about the care of others, including your younger brother and sister, dogs – especially Ruff, cats – especially Slinky, and goldfish, no matter what their names are. And I learned too that you care about the environment and even have grown some carrots and potatoes all by yourself in your Mum and Dad's garden.

I suppose if I had known all this, I wouldn't have tried to pull that fast one that 'they will never miss the money', or 'hey, you need stuff ... why wait until next Friday until you get your allowance ... get it now!' If I had known what a 'smart cookie' you are I would have guessed you'd see through me sooner or later and even tell me off and reject me.

Well, I can still fool other kids who aren't such smart cookies so it's probably a good idea to bid you adieu and head off on another assignment to another girl your age. I am sorry I mistook you for the person you obviously are not. You have taught me a lesson to be more careful about who I mess with. Do you think I should stick to kids a year or two younger than you?

We are now parting company.

Your Problem-from-the-past,

Stealing

CORRESPONDENCE WITH THE GROWING UP FAIRY

Cindy Dell Clark, in her ethnography on the part imaginal thinking plays in young people's responses to life-limiting illness, tells how they rely on imaginal thinking without requiring adult prompting. Although she reports that parents are dismissive of imaginal thinking under such grave conditions, there are at least two light-hearted circumstances in which parents foster their children's imaginations, (in the case of Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy) and participate in the 'unreal' (Dell Clark, 2003; 1995). With regard to the Tooth Fairy, children's anguish, resulting from the extraction and loss of a tooth, is compensated for by a small sum of money.

In the same spirit, the materialisation of the Growing Up Fairy (Epston, 1989, pp. 83-86) introduces a delightful ally and is readily embraced. Parents and children align with the Growing Up Fairy in reaction to the Problem's efforts to undergrow or grow them down. Letters can either be co-created or written by the therapist in conversation with the family who edit and referee the final version. We also recommend that any handwritten document be written in squiggly handwriting or, if it is electronically produced, in a font such as 'Curlz MT'. In addition, when the document is stealthily placed by the young person's bed, we suggest that it be accompanied by a favourite sweet to draw his or her attention.

From the Growing Up Fairy (I am related to the Tooth Fairy if you didn't know that already):

You and I have never met before. So let me tell you who I am. I am the Growing Up Fairy who goes around to young people when Problems grow them down and make them seem younger than their age. It is my job to hurry your growing up so you can catch yourself up and be your age. And sometimes kids your age like growing up so much they get even older than their age. Sometimes when you grow up in a hurry like this, you also get wiser. I am warning you just in case you don't want to be wise beyond your years. If so, let me know and I will make sure you don't get wise beyond your years.

In thinking about this Problem that has been bothering you, I really liked the idea you told everyone at the meeting the other day with David Epston. In all my years helping kids grow up when Problems have undergrown them, I know a good idea when I hear it. And that idea of yours sure sounds like a good one to me. If it doesn't work as well as you think it should, write me a letter with your Mum and Dad and they will post it to me. I have provided them with my postal address. I can't tell you my address as you might tell all your friends who want to grow up fast. Look, I have got all the work I can handle at the moment. Problems sure can undergrow some kids and to be honest, I don't think that is fair. Do you? One thing I am sure about is that I am always busy.

I will be keeping an eye over you to help you. That is my job and I will do my very best but sometimes I can be absent-minded or get called away.

Your friend,

The Growing Up Fairy.

PS I have written this letter to the grown up you, so you may need to ask your Mom or Dad to help you with a word or two. But after you grow back, I am pretty sure you will know what every word means in my letter.

CONCLUSION

By the time families arrive in our offices they have, in many instances, been hijacked by Problems and landed in circumstances that would have them judge themselves and each other on harsh and desolate grounds. Problems can set the conditions upon which their respective identities take shape. They can render extraneous and inconsequential all other information. The work presented here moves beyond the deleterious effects of single storied preoccupations towards broader fields of curiosity and possibility. In developing lines of enquiry in the realm of wonderfulnesses, we turn the tables on Problems and make central what might otherwise have been overlooked: the skills, knowledges, talents, imaginings and agilities that richly contribute to the stories by which young people would hope to be known (Epston, 1998). In addition, we investigate family and community genealogies and in the process discover the legacies and traditions that, together with wonderfulnesses, can provide the springboard for decisive actions in the face of Problems. As Problems are put on notice and informed in detail about family reserves, they become tentative and lose their hold on young people's lives. Letters can serve to document the discovery or recovery of cherished knowledges, heritages, and tellings that can coalesce in the form of alternative stories.

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